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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES
A PRECURSOR OF FREUD*

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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES was one of the favored few who are born into a setting of maximum privilege and opportunity. On both sides his parents were connected with the most influential families of that select group of Cambridge and Boston to which he later gave the name of Brahmins. His education was carefully guided into the best channels from the time he entered elementary school until he had completed the envied postgraduation medical studies in Europe under the famous masters of Paris. Holmes was one of the fortunate few who are capable of making the most of the rare advantages offered to them.

In 1871 Holmes, just turning sixty, had reached a position of distinction never attained by any other American physician or perhaps by any physician. In erudite Cambridge, regarded as the fountainhead of American literature and learning, he had become an arbiter whose word of praise sometimes decided the destiny of young authors who flocked to this seat of culture. In this literary center, the "Laughing Doctor," as Holmes was called, had become something more than an arbiter—a liberal, generous and beloved autocrat.

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At this time Holmes also was rounding out a distinguished career as a physician which had included a long service as dean of the faculty of medicine at Harvard. His lectures had become renowned because of his learning, wit, wisdom and progressiveness. Much earlier, in 1843, his fame was already secure. Almost at the outset of his career he made a contribution to science which would have assured him a permanent place among the pioneers of medicine had his life-work ended then, namely, his essay "On the Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever."[1]

The demonstration of the contagious nature of puerperal fever is shared by Holmes and Semmelweis of Austria. The latter has been hailed throughout Europe for this revolutionary discovery, although he published his observations four years after Holmes. Holmes was compelled to face strong opposition to the new theory from reactionary New England colleagues but did not have to meet the bitter antagonism and suffering which Semmelweis endured in Vienna. Persecution lent to Semmelweis "the aura of a martyr." On the other hand, in the career of Holmes, the observations concerning puerperal fever assumed the place of an episode in a succession of significant activities. The simple normalcy of the genius of Holmes needed no martyrdom or eccentricity for its emphasis and he affected none.

With the theory of puerperal fever established, Holmes threw himself into the investigation and examination of the great mass of knowledge which physics and chemistry were beginning to deliver into the hand of medicine. To much of this he added clarifying comment, original amplification and the weight of his authority, as in the founding of the Harvard Dental School. It is rarely recalled that, writing to William T. G. Morton on November 21, 1846 concerning the introduction of sulphurous ether, under the name of Letheon, to produce temporary loss of consciousness, he says, "All I will do is to give you a hint or two as to names—or the name to be applied—anesthesia."[2] Here, as was so often the case with Holmes' apt and pithy expression, the name anesthesia attained universal adoption.

The period in which Holmes (1809-1894) lived and worked saw tremendous change in medical theories and attitudes. Science was zigzagging forward. But it was also a period when an opposite tendency pervaded New England thought, not sporadically but as a general and sustained movement. The self-frustration and rigid repression long enforced by Calvinistically inclined clergy no longer found a compen-

satory outlet in the physical struggle for the conquest of resistive New England fields and mountainside. As an escape from emotional suppression many an individual and thwarted group in isolated New England villages were turning to mysticism, a serene substitute for an earlier hysterical reaction, "witchcraft," which had a century previously swept the countryside.

The semi-scientific discoveries of Mesmer had reached the American shore and were beginning to be incorporated with mystical ruminations in ingenious ways. Thus, this era of scientific advance supported odd cults, most of which in one way or another weakened the severe ecclesiastical structure and attempted to cure some of the conversion symptoms for which social and incidental repression could be held responsible. Phineas Quimby in bleak Maine and the mystics, Andrew Jackson Davis and Thomas Lake Harris, combining the power of suggestion with the faith of prayer, performed startling cures in New England and New York. At this time, too, Mary Baker Eddy boasted that her poems were printed "side by side with those of Whittier, Holmes and Phoebe Carey and are preserved in the files of the Lynn (Massachusetts) papers."[3] She later succeeded in shrewdly merging conflicting tendencies in an illusive paradox under the system she called Christian Science.

Holmes, for all his preferential social background and academic training, could not escape during childhood in his home and in his subsequent contacts the impact of repressive environmental influences. Holmes' father was a Calvinist minister; paradoxically, from all account, a rather genial Calvinist, but he firmly believed in predestination and preordination. Holmes attempted to escape from these concepts into science and scholarship, but they also created in him a bitter antipathy and lifelong rebellion against the crippling effects of damnation theology. The drive to counteract and correct such an irremediable philosophy appears time and again in his essays and in his three novels, which a critic, much to Holmes' annoyance, scoffingly called "medicated novels."

Holmes was first, last and forever the physician, with his thinking dominated by his medical training and his daily experiences. He was also a theological reformer, a philosopher, and, as we shall see, according to our present concept of this specialty, a psychiatrist. In this field his theories and approach are those of psychoanalysis and antedated Freud in many striking and important particulars.

Freud is reported to have replied to a Prussian official, who greeted him as the discoverer of the unconscious, with the words: "The poets and philosophers before me have discovered the unconscious; I have discovered the scientific method with which the unconscious can be studied."[4]

Holmes cannot be regarded as an inspired poet. His poetry seems to have followed a conventional manner of expression, then popular. It is the philosophic quality of Holmes' mind which led him to the discovery of many postulates which Freud, nearly a quarter of a century later, offered to a ridiculing academic group in Vienna in the very university where Semmelweis met similar discouraging rebuff. Holmes' precocious psychological pronouncements and likewise his unremitting fight for liberality and generosity in the estimation of mental aberration encountered relatively mild opposition in a milieu where the abolitionists had so long been battling for the physical freedom of all men. It is likely that into their zeal for the liberation of the negro, the abolitionists may have displaced and vicariously invested much of the energy unconsciously aimed at self-liberation from their own captivities. Less personal sacrifice was required to fight for the freedom of the distant blacks than to attempt to disturb their own immediate imprisoned selves.

The year 1871 has been mentioned because it was the one in which Holmes delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard an address entitled, "Mechanism in Thought and Morals." It was carefully revised, expanded and annotated before it was printed in "Pages from an Old Volume of Life."[5] So far as I can determine it has lain there unnoticed. I find no reference to it in accounts of Holmes' contributions to medicine. However, Van Wyck Brooks in "The Flowering of New England, 1815-1865,"[6] an absorbing study of that brilliant period of American cultural development, states that the essay of Holmes "was a brilliant anticipation of Dr. Freud." He also writes, "Dr. Holmes, perhaps unwittingly, had played into the hands of Dr. Darwin. He had played into the hands of Dr. Freud, and he had played into the hands of another doctor of whom he had never heard, Dr. Marx."

The cornerstone of Freud's theory is the importance and the influence of unconscious mentation and of repression, a force, as we have seen, not entirely unknown in New England. Freud has insisted upon the distinction between unconscious and subconscious to the extent that it appeared as though the term unconscious were originated by

him.* In most of the writings of predecessors and contemporaries the term subconscious had been regularly used to indicate mental operations which occurred below the level of consciousness. Other important pillars in the structure of psychoanalysis are the free association of ideas, the role of the censor, emphasis on the content of dream life and its import as a revelation of unconscious mentation, and in the first work of Breuer and Freud,[8] the existence of several personalities in the same individual.

Upon all these questions Holmes has much to say in the "Mechanism of Thought and Morals," and says it clearly, forcefully and unequivocally. The object of his thesis is never in doubt, namely, that such a thing as absolute freedom of the will cannot exist because of unconscious processes which are continually affecting the individual's conscious activity. Were it for this reason alone Holmes affirms we must regard many deviations in conduct with charity and understanding. I quote: "Do we ever think without knowing that we are thinking? The question may be disguised so as to look a little less paradoxical. Are there any mental processes of which we are unconscious at the time, but which we recognize as having taken place by finding certain results in our minds?"[5]

It is worth while to note that Holmes, without accenting it, uses the word unconscious in the sense which many psychoanalysts, including myself, thought had been originated by Freud. That the concept of the unconscious is not accidental may be proven by an additional citation from Holmes. "Unconscious activity is the rule with the actions most important to life. The lout who lies stretched on the tavern-bench, with just mental activity enough to keep his pipe from going out, is the unconscious tenant of a laboratory where such combinations are being constantly made as never Wöhler or Berthelot could put together; where such fabrics are woven, such problems of mechanism solved, such a commerce carried on with the elements and forces of the outer universe, that the industries of all the factories are mere indolence and awkwardness and unproductiveness compared to the miraculous activities of which his lazy bulk is the unheeding centre."[5]

Holmes not only appreciated the constant and restless activity of the unconscious but also that from the unconscious come those urgent drives which thrust aside the more deliberate thoughts and planning,

* William James[7] mentions the term "unconscious cerebration" but decides that "unconscious" is "better replaced" by the vaguer term "subconscious" or "sublimal."

those affect-laden urges that lend conviction and power to expressed thought. For example: "And so the orator,—I do not mean the poor slave of a manuscript, who takes his thought chilled from its mould, but the impassioned speaker who pours it forth as it flows coruscating from the furnace,—the orator only becomes our master at the moment when he himself is taken possession of, by a sudden rush of fresh inspiration. How well we know the flash of the eye, the thrill of the voice, which are the signature and symbol of nascent thought,—thought just emerging into consciousness, in which condition, as is the case with the chemist's elements, it has a combining force at other times wholly unknown!"[5]

The mechanism of the association of ideas, a postulate of psychoanalysis and the one upon which therapeutic psychoanalysis is fundamentally based, did not escape Holmes. In this connection I shall quote paragraphs scattered throughout the Phi Beta Kappa essay but here gathered into a sequence to give emphasis to the understanding which Holmes possessed of the mechanism of thought-operation and thought-flow.[5]

"We wish to remember something in the course of conversation. No effort of the will can reach it; but we say, 'Wait a minute, and it will come to me', and go on talking. Presently, perhaps some minutes later, the idea we are in search of comes all at once into the mind, delivered like a prepaid bundle, laid at the door of consciousness like a foundling in a basket. How it came there we know not. The mind must have been at work groping and feeling for it in the dark; it cannot have come of itself. Yet, all the while, our consciousness, so far as we are conscious of our consciousness, was busy with other thoughts."

This idea of unconscious associative thought-functioning is expressed more concisely as follows: "The more we examine the mechanism of thought, the more we shall see that the automatic, unconscious action of the mind enters largely into all its processes. Our definite ideas are stepping-stones; how we get from one to the other, we do not know; something carries us; we do not take the step."

But quite in harmony with his philosophy of insisting that society take into account unconscious factors in evaluating human conduct and at the same time holding that this does not exempt the individual from definite, undeniable responsibility for his acts, he adds: "The flow of thought is, like breathing, essentially mechanical and necessary, but incidentally capable of being modified to a greater or less extent by con-

scious effort. Our natural instincts and tastes have a basis which can no more be reached by the will than the sense of light and darkness, or that of heat and cold."

To show the scope with which Holmes has covered psychoanalytic mechanisms we find the following excerpts in regard to dreams—the first hints at wish-fulfillment: "We not rarely find our personality doubled in our dreams, and do battle with ourselves, unconscious that we are our own antagonists. Dr. Johnson dreamed that he had a contest of wit with an opponent, and got the worst of it: of course, he furnished the wit for both. Tartini heard the Devil play a wonderful sonata, and set it down on awaking. Who was the Devil but Tartini himself? I remember, in my youth, reading verses in a dream, written as I thought, by a rival fledgling of the Muse. They were so far beyond my powers, that I despaired of equalling them; yet I must have made them unconsciously as I read them."

In a second comment on dreams Holmes indicated that in dream-life problems are solved and that we may unconsciously act in obedience to these solutions in waking life—a theory advanced by one of the early analysts, Alphonse Maeder. "The cases are numerous where questions have been answered, or problems solved, in dreams, or during unconscious sleep. Two of our most distinguished professors in this institution have had such an experience, as they tell me; and one of them has often assured me that he never dreams. Somnambulism and double-consciousness offer another series of illustrations."

Holmes also goes thoroughly into the question of the quantity and quality of thought-flow—of the "internal movement" of which we are wholly unconscious . . . "when one idea brings up another;" of the indestructibility of memories and affects, of unconscious factors in plagiarism, of the function of censorship, of co-conscious mentation and double consciousness, the duality of our personalities, of the differences in the type of thought in males and females, and of the effects of sexual frustration in producing physical symptoms and character traits.

All of these concepts are stated in "Mechanism of Thought and Morals" and constitute a scientific formulation and recapitulation of thoughts which Holmes had confirmed during his long career as a practicing and consulting physician. As mentioned, Holmes is the author of three novels, the first of which, "Elsie Venner—A Romance of Destiny," appeared in 1859. It was followed in 1867 by a somewhat similar novel

"The Guardian Angel," and in 1884-5 by "A Mortal Antipathy." Although "Elsie Venner" enjoyed something of a popular success, literary critics dealt none too kindly with this or Holmes' subsequent psychological works of fiction which were "tainted with the physiological." Surely Holmes, far more sensitive concerning his literary reputation than about his clinical ability, would have been disappointed and incensed over having these studies of abnormal characters regarded as case histories. In the light of the development of modern psychiatry they remain as testimony to his medical acuity, his wisdom and psychiatric understanding.

In "Elsie Venner" the theme concerns the effect of pre-natal influence upon the abnormal character development of the heroine. The circumstance that the mother was bitten by a snake during pregnancy is held responsible for the reptilian instincts which Elsie Venner manifested. This interesting theme is still discussed and has points in common with a certain psychoanalytic theory which emphasizes the trauma of birth as the cause for the development of neuroses. The whole subject of pre-natal influence in relation to anxiety has recently been reëxamined in the light of observations made during the psychoanalyses of patients.

The second novel, "The Guardian Angel," is a study of hereditary influences on the mind of one individual and postulates that inherited personalities may enjoy "a kind of secondary or an imperfect yet semiconscious life"—a "co-tenancy" in one body. Holmes maintains that "this body in which we journey across the isthmus between the oceans is not a private carriage but an omnibus."

In Myrtle Hazard, of "The Guardian Angel," the traits and experiences of her antecedents reappear in her and produce strange and unaccountable actions (hysteria) seemingly belonging to the personalities of several ancestors. A similar concept has received wide attention under the term "collective unconscious" of Carl Jung, at one time closely affiliated with Freud. Jung would include as inherited in the unconscious not only the experiences of our immediate ancestors but of the race.

The final novel, "A Mortal Antipathy," is essentially the study of a compulsion neurosis by a fine psychiatrist. Written during the mellowness of Holmes' old age it is a final and unsparing thrust at meddling by the clergy in situations where emotional disturbance is threatening the very existence of the patient. The preface, as the prefaces of the two previous novels, defends the validity of the theme of the story from a

medical standpoint. In it Holmes approaches more significantly the psychoanalytic position of Freud—namely, that an infantile shock or trauma may cause a conditioning in a person which he never outgrows.

In this story Holmes realized that he was presenting a hazardous experiment and that the theory with which he accounted for the mortal antipathy for women of his main character, an otherwise normal young man, could hardly be rendered plausible. In the preface to the book he refers to the case of a "middle-aged man who could never pass a tall hall clock without an indefinable terror. While an infant in arms the heavy weight of one of these tall clocks had fallen with a loud crash and produced an impression which he had never got over."

An atmospheric impression of this kind associated itself with a terrible shock experienced by the infant who is the subject studied in "A Mortal Antipathy." This idea is far too fantastic for Holmes' recognized biographer, John T. Morse, Jr., who in 1896 writes, "From 'Elsie Venner' with her mysteriously envenomed nature to that absurd young man, Maurice Kirkwood, who could not bear the sight of a young girl because his pretty cousin had caused him to fall from a balcony in his boyhood, the downward step was indeed a long one." Holmes states that such impressions could not be outgrown, but might possibly be broken up by some sudden change in the nervous system affected by a cause as potent as the one which had produced the disordered condition—a theory being actively revived today in shock therapy in its various forms.

There cannot be the slightest doubt that Holmes himself is the doctor in each of the three stories of mental aberration—tedious reading as works of fiction. The repressive New England atmosphere produced similar strange physiological manifestations observed by Holmes at the bedside. This repressive cultural attitude lingered on after his death. But the scientific spirit also continued to grow greater and stronger in Cambridge.

Holmes' ideas lay in abeyance in New England for twenty-five years after his death. The link which Holmes established between Cambridge and Vienna in 1840 appeared again in 1909. A scholarly and distinguished professor of neurology at Harvard, James Jackson Putnam (1846-1918), whose time of medical activity overlapped that of Holmes, became convinced that the theories of a still unacclaimed Viennese investigator were worthy of thoughtful examination. And so Sigmund

Freud came to New England at Putnam's instigation and at the invitation of Stanley Hall.

Freud's lectures delivered at Clark University have become classics for students of psychoanalysis, but I think that Freud himself could not have conveyed the essence of his theory better and more convincingly to the distinguished, yet skeptical and critical audience he faced than these words: "There are thoughts that never emerge into consciousness, which yet make their influence felt among the perceptible mental currents, just as the unseen planets sway the movements of those which are watched and mapped by the astronomer. Old prejudices, that are ashamed to confess themselves, nudge our talking thought to utter their magisterial veto. In hours of languor, as Mr. Lecky has remarked, the beliefs and fancies of obsolete conditions are apt to take advantage of us. We know very little of the contents of our minds until some sudden jar brings them to light, as an earthquake that shakes down a miser's house brings out the old stockings full of gold, and all the hoards that have hid away in holes and crannies." As you may surmise this was written by Holmes.

One wonders why Holmes' ideas did not receive greater attention when they were written. It is probably because society at large was far less prepared to entertain them in 1870 than it was to accept Freud reluctantly in 1900. But this does not explain why Holmes' theories were not more critically tested by two truly distinguished scientists of the Boston group who immediately followed him—William James, the philosopher, and Morton Prince, the psychiatrist. The fact is that psychiatry still remained in a somewhat sterile stage of description and classification. The social significance of mental deviation, so stressed by Holmes, had not been grasped by science or society. Neither, therefore, could give heed to dynamism of thought or appreciate its correlation to the masterly clinical descriptions of Holmes sketched in this presentation.

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